RECONSIDERING ARCHIVAL CLASSICS

Back to the Future: Ernst Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World*

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When Ernst Posner published *Archives in the Ancient World* in 1972, most archivists in the United States and elsewhere knew astonishingly little about the history of their own profession. There was not a little irony in this. They had received their own training primarily in history, and that was how they thought it should be. Posner's book, one reviewer said, dispelled "any lingering doubts that the archivist must be trained basically in history."[1] A good many archivists still thought of themselves as historians first and archivists second. Very few had ever set out deliberately to become archivists, though they found themselves, happily or otherwise, having fallen into that profession on the way to or from their own historical scholarship. While they appreciated the value of knowing the past, the history they had studied was more likely to be that of the institutions and people who had produced the kinds of records they now cared for. American archivists were typically versed in the colonial and Revolutionary history of their own country, rather than that of other times and places. They had given little broad or systematic attention to the history of archives, of recordkeeping practices, of the changing nature of archival materials, of the uses of records in society, and a host of other topics. Most archivists in this country had no ancient records in their collections and never would, and so knowing anything about those apparently abstruse subjects seemed inapplicable to the tasks more immediately at hand. A common joke among archivists at the time asserted that they were practitioners of the world's oldest *learned* profession, but few had much understanding of the details of that hoary tradition.

[1] Lester J. Cappon, review in *American Archivist* 36 (January 1973): 67–69.

Even Posner himself admitted, with characteristic if not entirely justified modesty, that he had paid insufficient attention to the archives of antiquity. By the time he began work on the book, he confessed in the opening lines of its preface, he had been teaching archives for more than two decades but had seldom given the history of archives and archival practice the consideration it deserved. As often happens, it took unusual circumstances (fellowships that removed him from his regular routine) for him to recognize what he called the "continuity of archival practices and problems" across the millennia (xxxi).[2] Resolving to fill that wide gap in the knowledge and self-understanding of his profession, he spent more than ten years studying ancient archives and producing the volume that is now a classic of professional literature. If subsequent scholarship has both corroborated and challenged some of its conclusions, the original accomplishment is undiminished, and the book continues to reward study by later generations of professionals.

To begin with, the scope of *Archives in the Ancient World* is stunning, ranging from the clay tablets of Mesopotamia to the records of Imperial Rome, with intermediate stops in pharaonic, Ptolemaic, and Roman Egypt, classical Greece, Persia, and Republican Rome, together with a "postlude" on the Parthian and neo-Persian empires of the Middle East in the early Common Era. In short, the volume considers several thousand years of history, some very different cultures, and a wide range of languages, most of them now hopelessly "dead." Mastery of any one of these would be a lifetime's work, as evidenced by the substantial historiography in each field. The ability to summarize all of them for a nonspecialist audience was an even more difficult task, but Posner was able to pull that off, as the reviews of his work happily noted. "The great value of the book," said the classicist George Houston of the University of North Carolina in the *American Historical Review,* "is that it gives us, in concise and accessible form, a survey of all ancient archives."[3] Archivists, however, who might be considered the principal beneficiaries of reading the book, often treated it as a kind of curiosity. Even as they read it in the courses of the slowly emerging archival education programs of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, they still had difficulty applying it in any direct way to their own work. The information it offered about what were, to most of them, very unfamiliar cultures might be "interesting" or diverting, but it remained disconnected from their own practical concerns. What exactly did the problems of deciphering clay cuneiform tablets or papyri covered with exotic hieroglyphics have to do with managing collections of nineteenth-century letters, twentieth-century ledger books, or the still photographs, moving pictures, and sound recordings on their shelves? At best, the archives of the ancient world were deep—very deep—background, unrelated to

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[2] Citations to *Archives in the Ancient World* will be given in parentheses in the text.

[3] George Houston, review in *American Historical Review* 78 (April 1973): 408–9.

any day-to-day concern. An archivist might take a kind of encouragement from the long history of the profession described in these pages, but the rewards of reading were almost entirely personal, unconnected to one's "real" job.

Today, the usefulness of Posner's work may be easier to appreciate, even for those archivists who will never find themselves in the presence of an ancient record. Other works of archival history—one thinks of Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record*, an unexpected "cult classic" for archivists—have become popular, suggesting the insights that can come from paying attention to the many meanings of records and recordkeeping, regardless of the content of any particular collection of documents. Archivists of the present are acutely aware that they are living in the midst of an information revolution of enormous proportions. The ways in which information is captured and recorded, the ways information moves around in society, the uses (for good and ill) that we make of records and information, the constantly changing formats of records and the prospect that we will be unable to retrieve them from particular hardware- and software-dependent systems—all these daily realities of archivists in the early twenty-first century are arguments for taking as broad an approach as possible to understanding their work. A contemporary commonplace has it that the current information revolution is "unprecedented," but a moment's reflection demonstrates that it has, in fact, many precedents. The introduction of writing systems into previously oral cultures was more of a revolution in human affairs than the spread of cheap and available computer technology, and it seems obvious that understanding such earlier revolutions might help us get through our own. With the right perspective or stance, present-day archivists can learn something about their own work by studying the work—at once very different and very similar—of their remote predecessors. For that reason, *Archives in the Ancient World* reemerges not as a collection of oddities, but as a supremely relevant work of history.

More than once during his long and distinguished career, Ernst Posner was described with affectionate irony as Hitler's gift to the American archival profession. He had been born in Berlin on August 9, 1892, the youngest child in the family of a long line of medical doctors.[4] In 1910, he enrolled at the University of Berlin, where his father, a distinguished urologist, taught for many years, but the young man's studies were interrupted twice by military service—first for a routine peacetime tour of duty and again for action on both the eastern and western fronts in the First World War. Wounded, decorated, and returned to civilian life, he completed his studies in 1920, taking both a doctorate in history

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[4] The brief biography presented here is drawn from Paul Lewinson's "Introduction: The Two Careers of Ernst Posner," in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner*, ed. Ken Munden (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 7–19. See also Meyer Fishbein's tribute in *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 426–28. Posner's obituary is in the *Washington Post*, 24 April 1980, p. C4; an affectionate letter to the editor from a former American University colleague appears 4 May 1980, p. C6.

and his teaching license. Rather than pursue an academic career, however, he went to work in the Prussian State Archives, quickly assuming a range of duties and rising to the number two position in the administration of the agency. In addition to his regular responsibilities, he began to publish on archival and historical topics and to teach in the in-house Institute of Archival Science. He also oversaw a multivolume documentary edition pertaining to eighteenth-century German history. By the time he married in 1929, a distinguished archival career was already well underway.

Life changed dramatically for Posner, as it did for all German Jews, with the accession of Hitler to power at the beginning of 1933. The young archivist was dismissed from his administrative posts immediately; only his service in the Great War saved him, for the time being, from getting fired outright. Still, it was clear that he could continue his career only outside Germany, and a visiting historian from the United States suggested the possibility of his coming to America. He visited this country in 1938, making the acquaintance of such leaders of the emerging archival profession as Waldo Gifford Leland, Solon Justus Buck, and R. D. W. Connor. Unhappily, Posner had to return home at the conclusion of this lecture tour, and he arrived just in time to be rounded up in the wave of arrests and violence that followed Krystallnacht. He was sent for six weeks to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and might have perished there, but for his wife Katherina's dogged pleas for his release, based on his status as a veteran. He fled first to Stockholm and then to London, where she joined him, and the two landed in New York in July 1939.

Buck, who was then the director of research and publications at the National Archives, was scheduled to offer a course in archives administration at the American University in Washington, D.C., that fall, and he asked Posner to teach it with him. Within a few short years, Posner was teaching it on his own, cementing a relationship with the university that would last for the remainder of his active career: he would eventually serve as chair of the history department and dean of the graduate school. At a time when formal archival education was virtually nonexistent, Posner made the American University program the only place in North America where students could study the history and practice of archives as a scholarly discipline, both during the academic year and in the summer institute he quickly established in cooperation with the National Archives. His interests extended to other emerging disciplines as well, including an institute on the management of historical sites, which he conducted under the auspices of Colonial Williamsburg. He became active in the still-young Society of American Archivists, serving as a member of its council and editorial board and as president in 1955–1956. His standing in the profession made him the inevitable choice to conduct the landmark survey of the archival programs of the states, funded by the Council on Library Resources and resulting in *American State Archives* in 1964. His health failing in the next decade, he

retired and moved to Switzerland and then returned to his native land, where he died at Wiesbaden on April 18, 1980. Before that, however, he had devoted many years to his study of ancient archives. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1957 and a Fulbright in 1958 permitted him to spend time in Rome, conducting the research that would result a decade and a half later in *Archives in the Ancient World.* He was also working on a companion volume on archives in the medieval period, which he did not live to complete.[5]

Posner found a number of consistent themes in ancient archives that served as the connecting tissue through the widely differing civilizations he studied, and it was the long-term continuity of records and recordkeeping practices that impressed him most. The essential characteristics of records that were familiar in the present had been there, in one way or another, since antiquity. Lester Cappon underlined this point in his review of the book for the *American Archivist.* "The archivist" of today, Cappon wrote, "should seize the opportunity, available now for the first time, to learn about his predecessors, nameless though they be. . . . Their problems are still his problems."[6] Posner's starting point was a firm belief that the archives of the ancient world had "much in common with those of our own times" (2). It was possible, for example, to identify "those basic types of records that may be called constants in record creation" (3), regardless of the particular culture or institution that produced them. He specified six of these: laws; records of administrative activity; financial and accounting records; land ownership and tax records; records that facilitated "control over persons" in such areas as military service and forced labor; and "notarial" records, by which the state sanctioned and preserved the private transactions of individuals. Financial records of all sorts were perhaps the most numerous, and their impact was long-lasting, helping to fix "the character of financial administration" right down to the modern period (11). It was true that the distinction between current records ("files") and noncurrent records ("archives") was not as sharp in the ancient world as it would become in the modern one, and therefore the history of what moderns would consider the specifically archival component of ancient recordkeeping "must remain uneven and even partly contestable" (8). Even so, the word "archives" could be usefully applied to the host of records that archaeologists had been digging up and cataloging for nearly two centuries by the time Posner wrote.

In the same way, most aspects of the administration of records in the ancient world were fundamentally the same as those of the present. "All types of archival organization[s] known to us were already in operation in the ancient Near East," he insisted, "from simple storage facilities to archival establishments

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[5] Cappon mentions the intended volume on medieval archival practice in his *American Archivist* review.

[6] Cappon review, *American Archivist* 36 (January 1973): 69.

of considerable size" (28). Records-conscious bureaucracies had emerged early, never more fully than in the Egypt of the pharaohs (71), and most of the recognizable archival functions were also apparent. Accessioning, though sometimes helter-skelter, required that recordkeepers work closely with administrators to ensure an orderly flow of materials into archival custody (151–52). Like modern records, ancient records were periodically appraised and some of them subsequently destroyed. This might be done by selling them to the ancient equivalent of the recycler—in Egypt, this meant giving used papyri to the embalmers (138)—or, as with some tax records on wooden tablets in Republican Rome, by burning them in the aftermath of a tax amnesty (162–63). Arrangement and description occupied ancient archivists no less than their latter-day successors, with persistent concern for the "administrative provenance and . . . original arrangement" of records (5). Some Sumerian tablets were clearly identifiable as "series," for instance, and there were also many examples of "lists and other finding aids" (61). In Rome, even though the evidence was fragmentary, what would later be recognizable as the principle of provenance seemed to have been in effect. Records of magistrates and legislative assemblies under the Republic were kept in at least eighteen distinct "record groups" (183), while under the Empire, "organic series" were clearly evident, "not intermingled" with other series, and arranged in such a way that particular rolls could be identified as parts of distinct "record unit[s]," flagged by a clearly deliberate system of labeling (196–97).

The notion of research was of course unknown in the ancient world, but archives were still used regularly, and many repositories were located in prominent places in ancient cities precisely so they would be easy to access (53). The Greeks were particularly efficient at providing "reference service" (113), permitting both the production in court of precedent-setting documents and the compilation of historical collections of decrees and other official actions. As modern archivists know, the connection between arrangement and reference was a critical one and, however well done, not always foolproof. Posner took a certain delight in reproducing the note that a recordkeeper in Roman Egypt had written to himself on a surviving papyrus: "See where the contract of Alexander with the son of __ has gone" (146). Finally, physical preservation was a necessity in the past as in the present, and a good deal of the ancient archivist's energy had to go into preventing the destruction of fragile records. Some Mesopotamian tablets were enclosed in a second layer of "clay envelopes," for example, and they were stored in irrigated rooms that provided the "desirable atmospheric conditions" by allowing trenches of evaporating water to keep them moist and thus less likely to crumble or shatter (51–56).

Excavations across the ancient world permitted some other generalizations about archival buildings. The Greeks offered the most famous examples, and Posner devoted considerable attention to the *archeions* of the Greek city-states

which, in addition to caring for documentation in their own time, subsequently gave the very word "archives" to western languages. There were at least twenty cities that had such buildings in the classical period, and their function and importance was sufficient to call forth a detailed description in the *Politics* of Aristotle (91–92). Most elaborate of all was the Metroon (pronounced in three syllables) on the Agora at Athens, rebuilt as a records facility toward the end of the fifth century BCE and surviving until the third century CE (102–114). The archaeological record, together with surviving written sources, also provided evidence about the personnel who managed ancient collections of records. The elaborate "clerical apparatus" of Graeco-Roman Egypt—again, without the strict distinction between current and older records—seemed most developed. At the highest level of Roman administration in the Nile Valley, there might be one clerk to keep the daybooks, another for the correspondence, at least seven accountants (some with as many as ten assistants), and a "counterscribe" whose duty was to keep all the others honest (138–39). To be sure, these were the equivalent of modern-day file clerks and bureaucrats as much as archivists, but the maintenance of systematic collections of records was definitely a part of their function (143–44). Archivists of the modern period who studied *Archives in the Ancient World* would find much that was recognizable from their own experience. Perhaps even more important, they could find in its richly documented and attractively illustrated pages a certain reaffirmation that they were indeed carrying on a nearly timeless tradition. Almost as far back as it was possible to see in human affairs, the care of records had been essential to social organization. For that reason alone, Posner's book merited the place it quickly won in archival scholarship, a place it rightly retains today.

It is no disparagement of Posner's work to observe that the study of ancient record making and recordkeeping has continued in the decades since and that others have now challenged, refined, and revised some of his conclusions, even as they have confirmed others. A scholar of the highest standards, Posner himself would have expected no less. Readers of *Archives in the Ancient World* today have an advantage he did not: another generation and more of scholarship, work that continues into the present. Since he wrote, classicists and ancient historians have been going over some of the same ground he covered, but they were driven by new questions and different perspectives. A review of some of that scholarship shows how lively and, to archivists, important a field this remains.

Central to this recent work has been a new interest in the history of literacy. Of all the inventions of the ancient world, one was so obvious that it had been easy to overlook: writing itself. The societies Posner examined were ones in which writing systems had been created, making it possible to store information reliably outside the individual human brain while still keeping it usable. Despite the widespread use of pictographic and other earlier systems, it was the

emergence of the Greek alphabet by the middle of the eighth century BCE that proved the decisive turning point, transforming Greece from a predominantly oral culture to one that depended in essential ways on writing. Eric Havelock, a classicist, and Jack Goody, an anthropologist, led the way in these studies, arguing that the introduction of writing precipitated nothing less than a fundamental restructuring of the human mind. So long as the brain had to be occupied, as it necessarily was in oral cultures, with storing information unaided by external assistance, humans had to remember things in precise ways: the epithets and other mnemonic prompts of Homer, for example, had to be recalled the same way every time or crucial parts of the narrative would be lost. Indeed, that was their purpose. Achilles always had to be "brave" and dawn had to be "rosy-fingered" just as, much later, the big bad wolf had to "huff and puff and blow your house down" if their respective stories were going to come out right. Once the mind was freed from that necessity, because information could be written down externally and yet called back into service whenever desired, new ways of thinking were possible. One could be more analytical, taking a received idea and rearranging it, asking "what-if" questions, exploring a greater range of counter-factual possibilities, trying to say the same thing differently, and so on. It was no accident, Havelock asserted, that philosophy emerged from a literate world rather than an oral one.[7]

Insights about the functions and meaning of literacy set historians to the task of exploring the various roles that writing had played in earlier civilizations. It was curious that this task had not been undertaken previously. After all, learned men and women had been poring over classical texts for centuries. Approaching them less for what those texts actually said, however, and more from the perspective of what their very existence might mean opened new ways of looking at the specifically archival component of ancient writing. William V. Harris, then chair of the history department at Columbia University, provided a comprehensive survey of these issues in the Graeco-Roman world. Like Posner, he began by wondering whether it was possible to generalize about the uses of writing, but where Posner had found only six "basic types of records," Harris readily identified forty-one possible uses of writing and recording in a list that was not, he said, "exhaustive." The records of financial accounts and

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[7] The most important texts in this emerging approach include Havelock's principal works: *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963) and *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). See also several volumes from Goody's prodigious output: *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Also useful are Barry B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Kevin Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Philosophical perspective is also provided by Walter Ong's readable *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

various legal documents that Posner had specified were all there, but so were some that seemed to have entirely different purposes. Writing was used to label things, to make simple reminder-notes to oneself, to display political slogans, to petition authority, to commemorate the dead, to dedicate objects or people to the gods, to curse someone, to assist in performing magical spells, and even to compile collections of information, such as textbooks.[8] The level of literacy in the ancient world was much lower than scholars had previously believed, Harris insisted—never more than 10 percent of the population in either Greece or Rome, and probably well below that figure—but the uses of literacy were much wider than we had formerly appreciated.

Harris's attention to archives as such was not as systematic as Posner's—that was not his intention—but what he saw both supported and expanded some of his predecessor's conclusions. He concurred that the creation of the Athenian state archives was a crucial development and that the spread of what Posner had called notarial archives, safeguarding private records in public facilities, was likewise significant. In the Roman provinces by the second century CE, this even represented a kind of "archivization." There might be variations from place to place as to what kinds of records were "archivized," but there was evidence that the process, once underway in one part of the Empire, was likely to spread to others as well. Harris did note that the systematic keeping of statutes was slow to develop and, just as significant, that laws were sometimes "preserved" by inscribing them on stone and displaying them publicly, rather than by copying them onto fragile scrolls and storing them in an archives. Still, a number of developments in Rome indicated a kind of inexorability to the "archivization" process. Since formation of the Empire under Augustus, the births of all citizens were recorded and kept, for instance, along with the records of taxation and the census, including (presumably) those mentioned in the Christian gospels.[9]

However clumsy Harris's "archivization" neologism, he was right to raise the critical question of the extent to which a recognizable archival or documentary mentality had developed in the ancient world. Even if one could identify collections of records that looked, to later observers, like archives, was it correct to say that these were sufficiently like modern archives to justify use of the term in the same sense? Were there in antiquity deliberate collections of records, kept for their enduring value and future use? Those issues were joined particularly with respect to Greece, and it was here that later scholars most sharply challenged and most vigorously defended Posner's earlier conclusions. The clearest call for

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[8] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 26–27.

[9] For the notion of "archivization," see Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 204, note 149. His remarks on Greek archives and recordkeeping practices are at page 77; his comments on Roman practice at pages 207 and 209. In the Gospel of St. Luke, the census of Augustus was adduced as the reason for Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus.

rethinking came in the early 1990s from Rosalind Thomas of the University of London, who deliberately set out to move beyond what she called "the rationalist view of writing." It was a bias of literate people such as ourselves to suppose that written documents meant only (or primarily) what the words in them said, and like all biases this one obscured our vision, especially when looking at the very different cultures of antiquity. There were a host of " 'non-literate' uses of writing," she maintained, uses that were "symbolic or non-documentary," and this led her to conclude that "Greek (and indeed Roman) writing has many forms and functions—symbolic and magical, for example—which take us beyond the message contained merely in the written content of the document." Just as important, writing was not always "pre-emptive," as Havelock and others had argued. That notion held that literacy, once introduced into a given time and place, essentially drove out orality, that oral forms of transacting human affairs were simply replaced by written forms, which seemed more efficient and simply "better." Rather, Thomas insisted, literacy and orality continued to coexist in constantly shifting relationship to one another.[10]

The effect of this broader view of the uses of records—written documents were not intended only for such purposes as keeping track of financial accounts; sometimes, they might be made because they were thought to increase the potency of curses, not what we would consider a practical reason for record making—was to draw attention to "a whole range of texts . . . whose primary functions might not have been 'documentary' and administrative." That insight in turn led Thomas to conclude that it was anachronistic to look for too many parallels between ancient and contemporary documentary practice, particularly as they related to archives. For Posner to have claimed (156), for example, that one ancient businessman "must have realized the wisdom of clearly identifying each letter before filing it" was an attempt at drawing too straight a line from the present to the past, resulting in "a picture of reasonably effective and blandly modern archive-keeping in the ancient world," a picture that was as misleading as it was bland. Moreover, significant variations in the uses of writing from place to place might be elided into a common experience that never actually existed. The Metroon of Athens seemed a direct ancestor of modern-day national and state archives, but how did that compare with the recordkeeping practices of other cities? How, for example, to explain the almost complete absence of records at the same time in Sparta, "a state," Thomas said, "which seems to have run in all essentials without the help of writing, let alone archives"? Even in Athens itself, it was difficult to find a persistent reliance on documents that

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[10] Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74. See also her *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Thomas's work, and that of others, significantly influenced my own thinking, at about this same time, in "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 234–55.

indicated an "archival mentality": there were no land registries, no citizenship lists, no general accounting of public funds, no records of crime and punishment, and on and on. Written documents did indeed exist and circulate, but the vast majority of citizens remained blissfully unaware of the written word, were rarely touched by it, and seldom had any reason to pay attention to it. Ancient Greece might look like a place that "relied extensively" on records and documents, but that was a false impression: instead, it remained "an oral society in which the written word took second place to the spoken."[11]

If Thomas was direct in her challenge to Posner, he soon found his defender in a young American scholar, James Sickinger of Florida State University. Sickinger had written a doctoral dissertation on the Athenian Metroon, and that had led him to address questions of the nature and role of public records in the ancient city. He conceded that oral forms had retained their significance long after the introduction of writing, but he insisted that citizens there also "made, used, and kept written records related to their public business from a very early time." The central documentary collections of that repository (originally a temple to the mother of the gods, thereby suggesting the importance that was attached to recordkeeping by associating documents with a potent divine force) did not just appear out of nowhere in the late fifth century BCE; instead, the use of records had grown steadily for some time beforehand. The survival of very early law codes, such as that of the sixth-century lawgiver Solon, suggested that the importance of preserving public records had been recognized from a very early date, perhaps even within a century of the appearance of the alphabet itself. It was true, as Thomas had asserted, that the public display of laws by means of monumental inscription was as likely as storing them in repositories in other media, but that did not prove the absence of an intention to preserve them as archives. To begin with, inscriptions represented only a small percentage of all the records created and preserved, and other evidence demonstrated that "written documents were very much a part of the civic life of fifth-century Athens." It was fine, Sickinger conceded, to warn against the dangers of anachronism when studying ancient archives, but he thought that Thomas had done so "perhaps excessively" in her critique of Posner.[12]

The evidence Sickinger found suggested a more nuanced view, tending to reinforce Posner's conclusions about the overall continuity between ancient and

[11] Thomas, *Orality and Literacy*, 3. See her explicit challenge to Posner at pages 93–95; her comparison of Athens and Sparta at pages 136–39. For a caution against anachronism in studying ancient literacy, see also Stella Georgoudi, "Manieres d'archivage et archives des cités," in *Les Savoirs de l'Ecriture: en Grece Ancienne*, ed. Marcel Detienne and Giorgio Camassa (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1988), 221–47.

[12] James P. Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives in Classical Athens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 3, 24–33, 72, 91, and 198 note 3. Sickinger also presented his case for a specifically archival audience in "Literacy, Documents, and Archives in the Ancient Athenian Democracy," *American Archivist* 62 (Fall 1999): 229–46.

modern archival practice. Not only did the Metroon and other repositories point to this conclusion, but the emergence of particular personnel, facilities, and procedures apparently designed to provide systematic care for archives further demonstrated the development of those tasks. This evidence was sufficient to conclude that Posner's review of ancient archives in the light of modern practice was not entirely out of place. The ever-expanding number of secretaries, for example, mentioned in various texts (including Aristotle's *Politics* again), indicated an increasingly complex differentiation of roles in record making and recordkeeping functions. Some of these had general clerical responsibilities, but some seemed to specialize in copying, others in filing and retrieving, and still others in the care of only certain kinds of documents and not others. With these specialists came more attention to the management of documentary collections. Systems for the dating of records, a reliable key to their organization, were standardized surprisingly quickly, and this gave documentary collections greater precision than the more selective monumental inscriptions. Moreover, the uses that citizens made of records were varied, and these had a self-reinforcing effect: increased calls for the use of records promoted greater care in managing them. "Athenians of the classical period were notoriously litigious," Sickinger pointed out, and the use of records in legal proceedings and arbitration spread rapidly. Legislators apparently consulted older laws when drafting new ones, and texts served as important sources for political argument and other forms of oratory. Finally, documents began to assume their critical function in the study and writing of history, a genre created by Herodotus, who clearly used but did not reproduce documents in his history of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, and Thucydides, who did reproduce a number of texts word for word in his account of the wars between Athens and Sparta.[13] All this was still a long way from modern notions of research in archives, of course, but it nonetheless lent support to Posner's claim that practices familiar in the present were also recognizable in antiquity.

Further refinements in our knowledge of the role of records in Greece will no doubt be forthcoming, but in the meanwhile scholars have returned to some of the other civilizations considered in *Archives in the Ancient World*, civilizations that are perhaps less well known to westerners than Greece and Rome. The general result is more support than revision for Posner's conclusions. Particularly useful in filling those gaps is a collection of essays assembled by Maria Brosius as an outgrowth of a conference at Oxford University's Centre for the Studies of Ancient Documents in October 1998.[14] For those participants,

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[13] On the specialization of records personnel, see Sickinger, *Public Records and Archives,* 141–45; on the dating of records, see pages 150–57; on the use of records, see chapter 7 (Consultation).

[14] Maria Brosius, ed., *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

the recordkeeping practices of Greece represented the end of the story, not the beginning, so they went back further in time. Drawing on what can appear to nonspecialists as excruciatingly careful but stunningly learned archaeological, textual, and other forms of reconstruction, the authors considered case studies of record creation, management, and use in such places as ancient Ebla, Assyria, Minoan Crete, and elsewhere. The surviving records from these places were almost exclusively financial accounts and legal proceedings. None of the symbolic or metaphoric uses of writing (if any) had survived in these cultures, as they had in Greece and Rome, but the approaches to managing even that limited range of documentation were still impressive. The languages of these records included those that have been deciphered only recently and, in some cases, incompletely: Linear A and B, noncuneiform Mesopotamian, and various multilingual forms in Aramaic and Assyrian. Brosius and her colleagues started from the premise that Posner's book is "still unsurpassed in its attempt to discuss archival traditions of different civilizations." Even if later work such as their own added detail and offered changed interpretations, their debt to him was undiminished. They cast their net more widely across differing civilizations, but these comparisons with the more limited range he had studied had an important cumulative effect.

Brosius herself rightly framed the several cases of her contributors in terms of archival *traditions*. The identification of particular collections of records and archives was less important than the question of whether or not there were enduring, identifiable traditions and practices for the care and use of records. The presence of such systematic reliance on documentation would constitute evidence for the existence of the kind of "archival mentality" of which Thomas had spoken. For most of the civilizations under consideration, that mentality did indeed seem to be present. Rudimentary forms of records management were evident: at Ebla, for instance, individual bits of information in certain documents were regularly compiled into other, more complete forms, and the originals destroyed. There were many procedures and criteria for selecting certain documents and not others for long-term retention, and these expressed deliberate judgments about the values of records. In Assyria in the ninth century, private business records and deeds might be maintained over several generations, while the public records of one king were often destroyed immediately by his successor, eager to wipe out his memory and, in effect, start the world over again with the new regime. Procedures for organizing archives so that information could be retrieved when needed also emerged across the ancient Near East. In Persepolis, the very shape of the tablets on which information was recorded might indicate what kind of record it was, probably so that like items could be stored together. Most texts were inscribed on ovals, but financial accounts were recorded on rectangles, and there was even some differentiation of size and shape among the rectangles. Much earlier, at Ur,

there had been similar efforts to organize growing collections of documents, storing letters that pertained to particular legal actions together with their formal judicial outcomes, much like the modern case file. Thus, ancient archives shared many characteristics with their modern counterparts, providing accountability through the preservation and organization of records. It would be wrong, of course, to think that any archives in antiquity were "public" in the same way that modern repositories are, but for those who created and maintained them, archives had some obvious advantages.[15]

Another contribution to understanding archival practice in the ancient world came from an examination of the related world of libraries in Lionel Casson's popular *Libraries in the Ancient World*, which appeared in 2001 and got wide distribution after it was picked up by several book clubs. In a time long before the easy reproduction of mass copies of texts, the modern distinction between libraries and archives was hardly a sharp one, and Casson, an eminent classicist, acknowledged as much even as he charted emerging distinctions. At Nineveh, for example, administrative records were distinct from scholarly texts, recorded omens, and literary works such as the Gilgamesh epic; the latter three categories are more properly understood as protolibraries than as early archives. The very possibility of libraries was first realized by the Greeks, who along with perfection of the alphabet also devoted the necessary attention and resources to teaching people how to use it by setting up and maintaining schools. Growing, if always small, numbers of people who were able to read called forth increasing numbers of texts to be read: demand really did have an effect on supply. There, and later in Rome and elsewhere, systems for the faithful production of multiple copies of plays, philosophical works, and other writings combined with a wider availability of writing materials (papyrus, ink, pens) to promote the growth of libraries that looked much like their modern counterparts.[16]

The storied library at Alexandria, established about 300 BCE, serves as an appropriate exemplar of ancient library practice, and it helped set later standards as well. The great collection was, Casson tellingly points out, both "comprehensive, embracing books of all sorts from everywhere, and it was public, open to anyone with fitting scholarly or literary qualifications." Great attention was paid to the acquisition of texts: since Alexandria was a new city with little to recommend it on its own, scholars had to be attracted there by the promise of

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[15] See, in particular, Maria Brosius, "Ancient Archives and Concepts of Record-Keeping: An Introduction," in *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions*, 1–16; Alfonso Archi, "Archival Record-Keeping at Ebla, 2400–2350 B.C.," ibid., 17–36; Frederick Mario Fales, "Reflections on Neo-Assyrian Archives," ibid., 195–229; Maria Brosius, "Reconstructing an Archive: Account and Journal Texts from Persepolis," ibid., 264–83; and Karel van Lerberghe, "Private and Public: The Ur-Utu Archive at Sippar-Amnanum (Tell ed-Der)," ibid., 59–77.

[16] Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 11, 18, 21–26.

being able to find items they might not be able to get their hands on elsewhere and texts that were more reliably copied than in other places. The collection has been estimated to consist of just under half a million rolls, with another forty thousand in a branch "daughter library." Separate storage rooms filled with shelving were adjacent to the main hall, insofar as we can tell, and a detailed system for classifying and arranging the books on shelves was perfected by successive directors of the library. Borrowing was not permitted—readers used the collection on-site—but that became part of regular library practice by Roman times. The Alexandrian library came to a sad end, of course, though the precise date and reasons for its destruction remain controversial among scholars. Still, many features of its organization and administration were replicated in less legendary collections until the end of the classical period and well beyond. The crucial change in the format of library materials from scroll to codex was a later development, also discussed by Casson, one that enhanced the efficiency with which readers could use those texts, and that shift pointed clearly toward the characteristics of libraries in the present.[17] Like Posner, Casson emphasized the continuity between ancient and modern practice.

The continuing study of ancient libraries and archives is a testament to the work that Posner so ably began nearly half a century ago in *Archives in the Ancient World.* Even where subsequent scholars have disagreed with him, they still have had to make their intellectual case on terms he largely defined. Most scholars, regardless of their discipline, can only dream that their work will have such a lasting impact. But this is not a battle to be waged or observed only by specialists; nor is it one that pertains only to arcane disagreements about a remote, irrelevant past.

All archivists can learn something from these discussions and should familiarize themselves with this literature. Posner's work, now reissued as part of SAA's Archival Classics Series, is the right place to start, but it is not the place to end. Changes in the forms of recorded information and in the role of information in society are all around us today, and those changes can sometimes seem overwhelming. By studying the same or like processes in other societies in the past, societies that were experiencing equally disconcerting shifts, we gain a critical perspective on our own experience and, perhaps, the courage to face the challenges ahead. Aren't those, in the end, the real uses of history?

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[17] See especially Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*, chapter 3 (on Alexandria) and chapter 8 (on the coming of the codex). For examples of borrowing in Roman libraries, see pages 106–8.